The University of Arkansas Rice Processing Program….
An industry/university alliance serving the United States rice industry

Terry J. Siebenmorgen

The University of Arkansas Rice Processing Program was officially founded in 1994 to serve the US rice industry through multiple roles. The Program conducts both basic and applied research to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of current rice processing operations and provides information for the development of new products and processes. The Program comprises a multidisciplinary faculty and staff with backgrounds in engineering, cereal science, and sensory evaluation.

Program laboratories are housed in the department of Food Science at the University of Arkansas and include a pilot processing plant, cereal quality lab, sensory evaluation preparation and testing rooms, rheology and texture lab, and carbohydrate chemistry lab. Research projects are integrated to the degree possible and are conducted in primarily a non-proprietary approach; research results are typically openly shared with all program contributors.

Program financial support is predominantly extramural. Sources of funding include rice check-off funds from Arkansas rice producers, corporate sponsorships, University of Arkansas Institute of Food Science and Engineering matching funds to corporate contributions, and governmental agencies and foundations, most notably The Rice Foundation and the Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration. Corporate sponsors include companies and cooperatives involved in rice drying and milling, equipment and instrument manufacture, and end-use processors.

The primary means of communicating research results to industry sponsors is through an annual conference, referred to as the Industry Alliance Meeting, held in Fayetteville, AR. The meeting consists of research presentations by faculty, students, and staff, tours of facilities, and demonstrations of equipment and procedures used in research projects. Guest speakers, including selected industry sponsors and/or scientists from other institutions, are often included. The meeting is finalized with an open discussion of Program feedback and direction. Another means of outreach to corporate sponsors is the electronic distribution of quarterly research updates summarizing a current aspect of Program research. A Program advisory board comprises rice producers and corporate leaders; this board provides advice and counsel, particularly on issues relating to Program scope, outreach, and research topic direction.

Necessary components for initiating and building such an industry-interactive program include buy-in by industry sponsors—there must be an obvious need/return on investment, identifying/developing champions within companies, establishing a clear understanding of program structure/function, having a central faculty dedicated to the program, having a faculty core with integration/team attitudes, having early success of some form or fashion that builds internal and external enthusiasm and confidence.

There are tremendous advantages to both university faculty and the rice industry to having such a program, including producing research that is relevant to industry needs and providing a forum for communication of information to/from the industry. Besides the financial support, Program faculty are often allowed to conduct plant-scale research and can collaborate more closely with industry personnel. Students benefit by being afforded internships and long-term employment with sponsoring companies.